

Memories of "BK"

Bad Kreuznach, Germany



Beate Streicher, at her home in Bad Kreuznach, has many fond memories of the Army and of the many soldiers she knew and worked with over the years.

A 2nd Armored Division soldier helps out during a Thanksgiving celebration given in Bad Kreuznach for German civilians.

In April 1945 German women bring food to some of the thousands of German POWs held by the 8th Inf. Div. near Bad Kreuznach.



(Above) Soldiers and tanks of the 2nd Armored Division roll through Ahlen, Germany, on April 2, 1945.

(Right) U.S. soldiers take in the sights during a visit to Bad Kreuznach in April 1954.



Last summer's departure of the remaining American soldiers in Bad Kreuznach, Germany, brought to an end five decades of mutual friendship.

Story by Heike Hasenauer

WHEN the 1st Armored Division's headquarters moved last summer from Bad Kreuznach, Germany, to Wiesbaden, 36 miles away, it culminated the phased departure of the division and marked the end of a 50-year U.S. Army presence in the spa community of about 40,000 German citizens.

For the Americans who lived and worked at Rose Barracks, Marshall Kaserne and Hospital Kaserne, the move meant leaving behind close friends and favorite places, according to several long-time residents of the area, among them 85-year-old Beate Streicher.

The first contact Streicher had with U.S. soldiers was when the 2nd Armored Division marched into Bad Kreuznach while the city was occupied by the French, following World War II. With a background in French and English, which she studied at the University of Geneva, Switzerland, in 1939, she had worked as an interpreter for the French governor of the city for seven years.

When the Americans came to "BK," as they fondly referred to the city, she became the liaison between the French and Americans. And when the French left in 1951, she applied for a position as a German-language teacher at the American's elementary school.

"The kids said at that time, 'We don't need German. We don't want to learn from Nazis,'" said Streicher, whose husband, a German soldier in the war, was listed as missing in action and was never found. But despite the initial animosity of her students, she managed to teach a half-dozen classes daily, without books.

"After one year of teaching, I couldn't believe what happened," Streicher said. "At Christmastime, I received many presents. Gradually, the Americans realized we were not all Nazis."

A broader friendship between the Germans and Americans,

"U.S. soldiers were part of the community, and we were like a close-knit family," said Boris. "It's terrible for me that the Americans have left. I feel a great loss."

however, grew only gradually, over about five years, Streicher said. For the Germans who lived in the city that had been heavily bombed and where dozens of people died, time was critical in healing the wounds of war.

Other changes to life as they knew it required additional adjustments.

U.S. soldiers initially moved into town requisitioning homes, apartments, hotels and businesses. The Kurhaus, a landmark facility used for cultural events and celebrations, became the U.S. Officer's Club, Streicher said.

"At first, the Americans controlled the heat in our homes, too," she said. "They didn't want us to have a part of their heating system, because the U.S. Army paid for it."

Adding to the early tensions between former enemies was the Germans' seemingly hopeless struggle early on to rebuild their shattered economy. Local citizens hesitated to invest in industry of any kind for fear no one besides U.S. soldiers wanted to live

in BK; military exercises were conducted at Kuhberg, an area that became a training site, and U.S. helicopters often flew over the town, Streicher said.

U.S. soldiers were forbidden to socialize and shop in the community until the mid-1960s, said Streicher, so the Germans and Americans initially had little knowledge or understanding of each other.

After five years' teaching, Streicher began working as the 8th Inf. Div. community-relations officer, which gave her a first-hand look at how the Army operates. As the commanding general's interpreter, she accompanied him on maneuvers, bouncing around training areas in a jeep and traveling by helicopter to civic functions throughout Germany.

It was largely through her that both sides inched closer to understanding and friendship.

"The local people were so impressed that my picture often appeared in the newspaper with the Americans," Streicher said, "that more German women wanted to learn about the Americans. They helped form the German-American Women's Club. And, gradually, the Americans constructed sports fields and helped rebuild in other ways."

"In turn, we notified

German civilians return to their homes as U.S. troops push further into Germany in March 1945.

the newspapers to publicize the good things U.S. soldiers were doing in BK," said Streicher, who in 1977 left her community-relations position to teach Gateway and Headstart courses in the American community. It was a job she held until 1987.

"I have stacks of letters from soldiers," Streicher said. "They wrote things like: 'We love Germany now that we know you,' and 'Thank you for allowing us to share your culture.'"

"When my mother died, the general's wife sent food for my family," she said. "Americans do that sort of thing."

As many as 6,000 soldiers were stationed in Bad Kreuznach at that time, Streicher said. "It was a golden time, when a dollar could be exchanged for four Deutsch marks. You can't imagine how many Mercedes and Porsches were here," she said.

≡ A Historian Remembers

Richard Walter is a historian and reporter for the Rhein Zeitung in Bad Kreuznach, where he's lived since 1957.

During the Ardennes Offensive, in December 1944, German troops tried unsuccessfully to push the Americans back from Germany's borders in Belgium and Luxembourg, he said. U.S. troops continued to advance, breaking through the German

The 7th Army commander inspects the 2nd Arm'd. Div. honor guard at Bad Kreuznach in August 1952.

lines at Westfeld and the Eifel.

They were on one side of the Mosel River, the Germans on the other side, waiting, Walter said. Then the Americans advanced from the Mosel to the Nahe River, near Bad Kreuznach.

"I saw the first American tanks approaching Bad Kreuznach at 11 a.m. on March 16, 1945," said Walter, who was a lieutenant in a German rocket-artillery unit that had fought at Normandy and in the Ardennes before passing through Bad Kreuznach while retreating from the American advance.

There weren't many tanks, and they just sat at a crossing and waited, Walter said. Then they went around Bad Kreuznach from both sides.

"For two days, nothing happened,"

Walter said. "The German soldiers had all left the city on March 16, after planting explosives on all the bridges and blowing them up." On March 18, the Americans marched into the city unimpeded.

In the weeks that followed, a small contingent of U.S. soldiers searched for Nazis throughout the area, Walter said. Suspects were taken to a

detention center in Idar-Oberstein. After Germany capitulated, on May 10, 1945, many German POWs arrived in Bad Kreuznach from the front lines, Walter said.

There was a detention center for German POWs near the former 1st Arm'd. Div.'s headquarters, Walter said. Later, another larger center was established between Bad Kreuznach and Bretzenheim.

On July 10, 1945, when Germany was divided into U.S., British, Russian and French zones, Bad Kreuznach was in the French Zone, so the Americans left and the French occupied the city until mid-1951.

When the Americans returned in 1951, kasernes were quickly built and hundreds of soldiers and their families began arriving. One-fifth of the city was composed of Americans.

"They were self-sufficient; they brought their own food and built everything they needed, from hospitals and schools to stores and movie theaters," Walter said.

The U.S. Army put its stamp on Bad Kreuznach, said Walter. "The friendships Americans and Germans shared will live in our hearts for many years to come."

≡ The City Pays Tribute

Today, the barracks, housing areas

and playgrounds once alive with activity at BK, are devoid of U.S. soldiers and families, "but the U.S. Army's presence will never be forgotten," Streicher said.

MAJ Thomas Shrader, a project officer on the division staff during the transition from BK to Wiesbaden, said the Germans erected a monument at the city courthouse, paid for by donations from the German people. It lists the three U.S. Army units once stationed in the city — the 1st Arm'd. Div., 2nd Arm'd. Div. and 8th Infantry Div.

"The city sponsored two days of festivities to honor the Americans when they left," said Christel Boris, who was the divisions' deputy public affairs officer from 1973 to 1998, when hundreds of 8th Inf. Div. and 1st Arm'd.

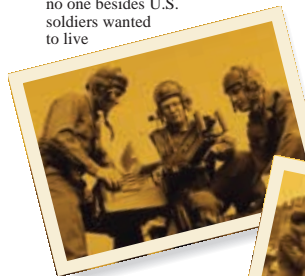
Div. soldiers were stationed in BK. Europe's military considerations were much different during the "Cold War," she said. Thousands of soldiers were strategically located to protect Germany from an invasion across its borders.

"U.S. soldiers were part of the community, and we were like a close-knit family," said Boris. "It's terrible for me that the Americans have left. I feel a great loss."

Borris chose not to continue working for the division at its new location. "It would make me too sad," she said. "It's easier for me to draw the line here." □

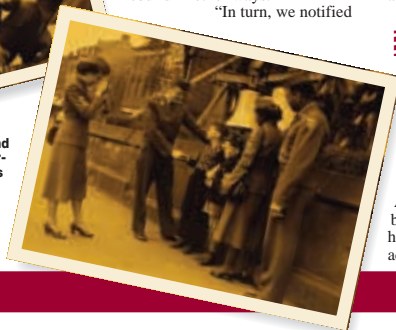


A memorial in Bad Kreuznach commemorates the Army's 50-year presence in the city.



(Above) Tankers of the 2nd Arm'd. Div. take a break during 1952 field maneuvers near Bad Kreuznach.

(Right) German children made friends with the Americans early on.



The casing of the 410th Base Support Battalion's colors on Dec. 14, 2000, was another act in the phased departure of American troops from Bad Kreuznach.